

The Stealing of Marcus Keane

Denise Dowdall

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Burke Crest - a chained cat sejant.

In September 1884, the newspapers were alive with reports of a strange body-snatching case involving one of County Clare's most prominent citizens and a woman in his employment. The victims were land agent , Marcus Keane, and a woman called Margaret Barnes who was described by the newspapers as a governess in the Keane household and a distant relation. The scene was Kilmaley church old burial ground, about six miles from Ennis and the site of the Keane family vault. Situated picturesquely by the banks of the Furroor River, the church had been in ruins for a long time when these events occurred. There were two holy wells in the churchyard, one dedicated to Sgrevaun of Clondagad. ¹ St Maley, after which the church was named, was as mysterious as the circumstances of this story. He leaves no trace in the written history of his time.

At the time of the incident in question , the Keane family vault at Kilmaley was full and Marcus Keane planned to build a private mausoleum at his main property, *Beech Park*, to accommodate future interments.

¹ James Frost , *History and Topography of County of Clare*, 1893, page 120.

Sixth son of Richard Fada Keane , Marcus Keane was born in 1815, into a family that had been established in Clare from the north of the country since the Thirteenth Century.² The abundance of archaeological treasures in his native county stimulated Keane's life-long interest in antiquities and he was an active member of the Royal Irish Academy. The miraculous bell shrine of St Senan's from Scattery Island Abbey was one of a number of artefacts which he kept in his possession. He was also the author of a book called *The Towers and Temples of Ancient Ireland: Their Origin and History (1867)*, where he supported the theory that the round towers of Ireland were not Celtic monastic sites at all but rather the result of Cuthite pagan worship .

Joining the family land agency business as a young man, Keane represented some of Clare's largest landlords, including the Conynghams, the Vandeleurs and the Westbys, in addition to building up his own substantial land holdings, mainly in the baronies of Moyarta, Islands and Bunratty Upper. By the 1870s, Keane's landholding was estimated to be in excess of four and a half thousand acres. ³ Keane married Louisa Isabella Westby, daughter of one of his major clients, Nicholas Westby, in London's parish of Marylebone, 1847.

Several houses in Clare were associated with the Keane family. One was *Doondalhen* (fort of the dark pool) at Kilbaha, overlooking Loop Head. Built in the middle of the Nineteenth Century, it was an L- shaped , three bay,two storey house with a naturally-formed swimming pool on its grounds that gave the property its title. *Beech Park* , now demolished, stood about a mile from Ennis, was of similar construction to *Dun Dalhen* and was set on seventeen acres.

Press reports frequently prefixed any mention of Marcus Keane's name with the word "popular". But the true state of affairs was very different. Most of Keane's clients were known for their enthusiastic land clearance activities during the Famine and as their agent and representative, carrying out their wishes with unusual efficiency, Keane bore the brunt of local resentment, even acquiring the infamous title, the "Clare Exterminator" . ⁴

The situation was aggravated in the early 1850s when Marcus Keane got into an acrimonious dispute with local Catholic parish priest, Father Michael Meehan, who accused the land agent of aggressive proselytising at the school in Kilbaha. ⁵ Keane's refusal to allow a Catholic church to be built at Loop head, (because it went against the wishes of the local landlord, Edward Westby), prompted the priest to erect his mobile *Little Arc* on Kilbaha foreshore, which served as a powerful focus for local defiance against what was seen as an abuse of power on the part of Keane and Westby.

² Philip Dwyer, *The Diocese of Killaloe from the Reformation to the close of the Eighteenth Century*, page 492. 1878. Hodges, Foster and Figgis.

³ <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie> ,NUI Galway, Landed Estates Database. Accessed November 2012.

⁴ Ciarán Ó Murchadha ,*The Great Famine: Ireland's Agony 1845-1852*, page 131.

⁵ *The Freeman's Journal*, Sep. 29, 1851.

felis demulcta mitis

Keane Motto

The unexpected death of Margaret Barnes, an Englishwoman described as Keane's governess and then in later press reports as his housekeeper, occurred at *Beech Park* at the end of May 1883. The cause of death was erysipelas. According to the papers, Keane had her remains temporarily interred at Kilmaley cemetery in a vault belonging to the enigmatic Burke family. Little is documented about these Burkes, who were classified as extinct in the area at this time. Thought to be a family of transplanted Catholics, they had left their mark on the local landscape through place names such as *Loughburke*, whose lands had been largely sold off to Charles Lucas MP and his heirs by the early 1780s.⁶ The family was also associated with a nearby house called *Strasburgh*, now demolished except for the main gates and some farm buildings. Local lore suggested that one of their last members, James Burke, had fought in the French Revolution and had met his death on the Continent in 1790. This version is contradicted by his Kilmaley grave inscription, however, which confirms that he died in Clare in 1781. A French connection was established however when James's only child, Jane, married Rickard O'Connell, a member of the Derrynane O'Connells, who served as a captain in the *Legion of Mailebois*. The remains of the family crest on James Burke's Kilmaley memorial, a chained cat sejant,⁷ suggests a connection with other prominent branches of the Burke family, like the Burkes of Castle Connell and even the Burkes of Westport.

Keane's decision to open and then use the vault of this family who bore no relationship to him was unusual and may have contributed to his fate after death. (There is the uncanny coincidence of a feline theme in the coat of arms of both Keane and Burke families.)



1880s Eviction scene at Mathias Magrath's house, Moyasta, Co. Clare. Courtesy of the Robert French (1841-1917) Collection, the National Library of Ireland.

⁶ Registry of Deeds, Henrietta Street Dublin, Burke to Lucas 1781, book 340, page 378, deed 229960.

⁷ *Association for the Preservation of the Memorials of the Dead*, 1897, Vol. III (3), Courtesy of Clare County Library. <http://www.clarelibrary.ie>.

Marcus Keane died aged 69 in October 1883, only a few months after Margaret Barnes. His death occurred before plans for his private mausoleum at *Beech Park* were completed and so Keane's body joined the governess in the Burke vault. When the mausoleum was completed in September 1884, Keane's son, Marcus Junior, went to the Burke vault to have the bodies reburied. On opening the vault, which was located on the south wall of Kilmaley ruined church, he discovered that there was no trace of the remains. The discovery was considered to be doubly upsetting because Mrs Louisa Keane was away on the continent for health reasons and it was thought that hearing about the desecration in the newspapers could prove fatal.

A large search party was organised made up of a combination of policemen and workers employed by the Keanes. Despite an exhaustive search, no trace could be found of the missing coffins. It was accepted that the body snatch had been planned and pre-meditated as it was estimated that a large group of men would have been required to move the lead-lined coffins from their temporary resting place in the underground vault. Theories about the motive for the body snatch were developed. Blackmail was considered then quickly ruled out when no demands for money were made in subsequent days and weeks. Historic animosities towards Marcus Keane were also suspected. (As late as December 1885, sixty tons of hay belonging to the Keane family at *Beech Park* were deliberately set on fire. ⁸) This theory was eventually ruled out in favour of an obscure local *pisreog* which held that famine and pestilence would follow any attempt to rebury a body out of the parish.

In spite of many searches, it was a full seven years before the remains of Margaret Barnes and Marcus Keane were located. The remains were closer to home than either the authorities or the Keane family could have imagined. Both bodies were found to have been buried surreptitiously in another region of the same graveyard. The bodies had not been tampered with but the nameplates and coffin handles had been removed and were placed in the second grave.

A further baffling aspect of the case is the mysterious state of the Burke vault, which was described by the papers at the time as being totally devoid of the remains of the original family except for a few skull fragments. ⁹ In a macabre postscript a body with head wounds was found in the same vault at Kilmaley in 1922 and was never identified.

Whatever the relations between Marcus Keane and the local population, the parishioners of Drumcliff and Kilmaley were determined to have the last word in his final resting place.

“Traditions linger unchanged among a superstitious peasantry for centuries, and are never perhaps totally extinguished by lapse of time”.¹⁰

⁸ *The Nenagh Guardian*, Dec. 23rd, 1885.

⁹ *The Irish Times*, 20th Sept, 1884.

¹⁰ Marcus Keane, *The Towers and Temples of Ancient Ireland: Their Origin and History*, page 217.